

Title: An overview of “The Raven”

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[Dana Gioia is a poet and critic. His books include *The Gods of Winter*, 1991, and *Can Poetry Matter?* Gioia notes that “The Raven,” at one time deemed “the most popular lyric poem in the work,” has nonetheless been repeatedly maligned by leading critics. In the following essay, Gioia attempts to explain the poem's universal and timeless appeal.]

From the moment of its first publication in the New York *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845, “**The Raven**” has been a famous poem. It caused an immediate national sensation and was widely reprinted, discussed, parodied, and performed—catapulting its penurious and dejected thirty-six-year-old author into celebrity. The poem was soon translated into many European languages, most notably by the French Symbolist poet St  phane Mallarm  , who insisted on using prose because French could not recreate the original's verbal magic. By 1885 one American critic could plausibly call Poe's work “the most popular lyric poem in the world.” Even today, “**The Raven**” still remains one of the few poems millions of Americans can quote from memory. Despite the poem's enduring fame and extraordinary influence, however, leading critics have rarely found much to say in its favor. They have objected to its gothic atmosphere, ornate musicality, horror-tale narrative, and even its meter. And yet, a century and a half after its first appearance, the poem survives with its popularity undiminished.

What is the secret of “**The Raven**”'s uniquely powerful appeal? The question may be unanswerable in any final sense, but we can begin to understand the poem's strange authority by isolating at least four key elements: its compelling narrative structure, darkly evocative atmosphere, hypnotic verbal music, and archetypal symbolism. Although none of these elements was original to “**The Raven**,” their masterful combination created a strikingly original and singularly arresting poem.

The key to understanding “**The Raven**” is to read it as a narrative poem. It is a narrative of haunting lyricality, to be sure, but its central impulse is to tell a memorable story. The hypnotic swing of the trochaic meter, the insistent chime of the internal rhymes, and its unforgettable refrain of “Nevermore” provide each stanza with a song-like intensity, but the poem's structure remains undeviatingly narrative. Stanza by stanza, “**The Raven**” moves sequentially through the situation it describes. Any reader familiar with short stories like “**The Tell-Tale Heart**” or “**The Fall of the House of Usher**” will recognize Poe's innovative narrative method. By imbuing a simple, linear story with brooding atmosphere of intricately arranged details, Poe perfected a style that allowed every moment to reinforce the tale's ultimate effect.

The time and setting of “**The Raven**” are as much a part of the story as the actions that take place. (In Poe's work the physical setting often reflects the inner personality or emotion of the central character.) The poem begins at midnight in December—the last moment of a spent day in

the final month of the year. Internally and externally, it is a time of death and decay. Even the “dying” fireplace embers reflect the moribund atmosphere. The setting is contained and claustrophobic—a single room. The narrator himself mirrors the time and locale. “Weak and weary,” he seems trapped in his richly furnished prison. He hopes for the morning—the return of light and life—but tonight all he can do is brood on his dead love, “the lost Lenore,” and feel the tangible horror of his current situation.

The story that now unfolds is simple, terrifying, and tragic. The narrator hears a mysterious tapping at his chamber door. He thinks at first it is a late night visitor, but opening the door, he finds only “Darkness there, and nothing more.” (This initial glimpse into black nothingness will prove prophetic of his ultimate fate.) Half afraid, half wishful, the speaker whispers the name of his dead lover. Irrationally he hopes the visitor is her ghost. There comes no reply, however, except the echo of his own voice. Soon the tapping resumes—now at his window. Opening the shutter, he finds a Raven. (Poe capitalizes the bird to suggest it is no ordinary raven.) The bird flutters in and immediately perches on the bust of Pallas Athena, the classical goddess of wisdom.

By now Poe has already established the basic symbolic framework of the poem, which—characteristically for him—is both structurally simple and elaborately detailed. **“The Raven”** divides its characters and imagery into two conflicting worlds of light and darkness. Virtually every detail in the poem reflects one world or the other. Lenore, who is repeatedly described as “radiant” epitomizes the world of light—along with angels she has now joined. Other images of light include the white bust of Pallas and the lamplight that illumines the speaker's chamber, his haven from the outer darkness. The Raven, however, represents the seemingly larger and more powerful forces of darkness on this black December midnight. His shadow, the final image of the poem, demonstrates his power to darken the weak and dying light of the speaker's refuge. The ebony bird's ironic perch on the bust of Pallas also underscores the inability of reason and learning (further symbolized by the narrator's unconsoling books) to combat the powers of blackness and despair. The contrasting worlds of light and darkness gradually acquire additional symbolic resonances: they also represent life and death—the speaker's vain hope of an afterlife with Lenore and the terrifying vision of eternal nothingness.

The movement of **“The Raven”**'s plot reinforces the poem's essentially symbolic nature, and all of Poe's idiosyncratic linguistic genius endows the story with supernatural significance. The narrative situation is, of course, not implausible in strictly naturalistic terms. The speaker may simply have encountered an escaped pet whose previous owner had taught the bird to repeat the word “nevermore.” Poe's language, however, gradually convinces us that a purely rational explanation will not suffice, however neatly it fits the external facts. The conflicting worlds of light and darkness suggest their transcendent counterparts—heaven and hell. In contrast to the heavenly and angelic Lenore, the Raven is repeatedly and explicitly characterized in demonic terms. This imperious and implacable visitor has come from the land of death, “the Night's Plutonian shore.” He seems—at least to the agitated narrator—a devil sent to claim the speaker for the underworld. The speaker's dawning awareness of his hellish doom is reflected in the poem's changing refrain, which begins as “nothing more” and “evermore,” but darkens once the bird speaks his prophetic “nevermore.” By the poem's last line, the narrator has accepted the

bird's dire prophecy. Echoing his shadowy tormentor, he declares his soul "Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

Indeed, the conclusion of "**The Raven**" stands as one of the most harrowing moments in American poetry—a vision of psychological, emotional, and spiritual paralysis and despair. The gothic decor and high rhetoric do not disguise the emotional authenticity of the final tableau. As Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and the other Symbolists understood, "**The Raven**" is the signature work of *un poète maudit*, "a cursed poet." They honored Poe as a brilliant artist who was destroyed by his very gifts of heightened perception. Like its author, the poem's protagonist is an aesthete and intellectual whose mental gifts provide no protection against tragedy. The depth of his love for the lost Lenore only makes his suffering more intense and enduring.

"**The Raven**" has a singular claim in nineteenth-century American literary history. Poe left a detailed (if also often unconvincing) account of the poem's genesis. Elated by its trans-Atlantic acclaim, Poe published "**The Philosophy of Composition**" in April of 1846, which purports to "explain step by step" the process by which he wrote "**The Raven**." Inspiration or chance, Poe claimed, played no part in the poem's composition. "**The Raven**" emerged from a deliberate and conscious process that progressed "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." Hardly anyone has taken Poe's rational view of poetic composition at face value, but psychological critics have justifiably viewed its arguments as a classic case of compensation. An obsessive and emotionally wounded poet, Poe preferred to present himself as controlled, deliberate, and logical. Even if we accept the basic premise of Poe's claim that he created the poem systematically from abstract goals, we are entitled to comment that only an author full of raging emotions would insist on the necessity for such complete artistic control.

"**The Raven**" is not a tragedy in the conventional sense, but the drama of the poem possesses a genuinely tragic element. The speaker does not turn away from the horrifying void. He tries to act reasonably in a situation where reason provides no defense. Even if the protagonist does not rise fully to the heroic demands of tragedy by struggling against his fate, neither does he try to escape it. He steadfastly faces his tormentor, a demonic emblem (to quote Poe's own italicized description from "**The Philosophy of Composition**") of "*Mournful and Neverending Remembrance*." Trapped and doomed, the protagonist nonetheless articulates what it is like to endure the limits of psychological suffering. Whether Poe himself fully shared those agonies we cannot say, but however rational the composition of "**The Raven**" truly was, the wellsprings of human pain and loss feeding it were vastly deep and authentic. As Walt Whitman wrote of his own work, "Who touches this touches a man." Few poems have touched so many readers so deeply as "**The Raven**."

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